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TAGS: PREL PGOV SY TU IS GB
SUBJECT: PM OLMERT TO VISIT ANKARA DECEMBER 22

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (U) The Israeli popular daily "Yediot Aharonot" reported December 19 that Prime Minister Olmert will visit Ankara December 22 to meet PM Erdogan. According to the article, which was written by Olmert's favorite correspondent, Shim'on Schiffer, "the purpose of the visit, from the Prime Minister's point of view, is to prepare the ground for direct talks between Israel and Syria, which will obligate any government formed after the elections to continue in this direction." Schiffer's article also "reveals" that Olmert used a visit to London earlier this week to "meet with contacts involved in negotiations with Syria" in order to exchange messages with Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad. Opposition Likud Party leader Netanyahu is quoted in the same newspaper as saying that he will not be bound by "Olmert's concessions" to Syria if he becomes Israel's next Prime Minister.

¶2. (C) Turkish Embassy DCM Mehmet Bozay confirmed Olmert's visit to Ankara. In a December 19 conversation with A/DCM, Bozay said the visit is being billed as a "farewell call" on Erdogan, with whom Olmert will dine the evening of the 22nd before returning to Jerusalem. Bozay noted, however, that the indirect talks with Syria will certainly be high on both Olmert and Erdogan's agenda. Bozay agreed that Olmert is projecting to all parties that he remains in charge of the Syrian negotiations even though he is in a caretaker capacity. Bozay also confirmed that, Israeli media speculation to the contrary, no fifth round of indirect talks has been scheduled. Bozay also said that Turkish President Abdullah Gul has postponed a long-anticipated early January visit to Israel due to "ear problems" that prevent him from flying. Gul reportedly has also cancelled January visits to Baghdad and Moscow.

¶3. (C) Comment. Olmert used his speech closing the December 18 annual conference of the prestigious, Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies to declare that a peace agreement with Syria can be achieved and would represent an enormous strategic gain for Israel. The overwhelming majority of the Israeli political class, however, argues that as a highly unpopular caretaker PM only two months before national elections, Olmert lacks the political weight or popular support to deliver on any negotiated agreements with either the Syrians or Palestinians.

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